

Money-makers

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH MIKE LASSITER



NICK de la TORRE: CHRONICLE

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Demand rising for healthy food

Mike Lassiter knows franchising and he knows Houston. So it only makes sense that his latest endeavor is trying to carve a niche in his hometown.

Lassiter left Houston in 1985 to work for Fox Photo in Atlanta, where he took his staff to eat at Schlotzky's just about every week. He liked the franchise so much that he eventually invested in it and became the chain's second-largest operator in the U.S.

In 1999, he sold his interest in Schlotzky's and began to explore new investment opportunities. That led to him forming his company Franchising Concepts and his

return to the Houston market to open Rising Roll Gourmet.

Lassiter talked recently with Chronicle correspondent Mason Lerner. Here are excerpts from that conversation.

Q: What does Franchising Concepts do?

A: We look for a company that has a proven business model and we help them franchise their business. One of the companies we identified was Rising Roll Gourmet. I fell in love with the concept.

The concept had been Zagat-rated for a number of years. I loved the product. I was a customer of the

product. And I said this is something special. We started working with the founders of Rising Roll to get it franchised.

Q: What is Rising Roll Gourmet?

A: It is a very high-end, gourmet sandwich concept that focuses on a variety of different flavor profiles. When you look at the Rising Roll menu, unlike many other sandwich shops, we have over 50 items on the menu. We have a variety of over 40 gourmet sandwiches.

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that, is we have a 12-foot deli case, and it is full of chicken salad, potato salad, pasta salad and many other items that we make from scratch. Our product is used for 36 hours and that is it.

Q: Are you working on any other franchise ideas for the Houston area?

A: We have another concept that we are invested in called Justix. And it is grilled food on a stick. It is a very healthy fast, casual concept with the focus on high quality food that is very healthy. We are in the early phases. We are not ready to launch that yet, but we are coming.

Q: Is the demand for fast, casual and healthy increasing?

A: There is definitely a demand for that. You have the baby boomers who are starting to focus on eating much healthier than they have in the past. When you have fast, casual concepts that are not only delivering a higher quality product, but they can add a health component to that, it becomes very appealing to consumers.

Q: What is appealing to you about the market in Houston?

A: I grew up in Houston. I know the market very well. I know it is competitive for restaurants. But the demographic profile of the Houston market has so many areas where the concept makes sense.

We have identified 17 markets that we would like to go into.